



The Beautiful Woman

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When you see a young woman, do you make a judgement about whether or not she is 'beautiful'? How does this happen? Does it just automatically occur to you that, "She is so beautiful"? Or "She is very ugly?" Is your perception of beauty based on some authority? Or is it some kind of emotional decision? Do you first think about the reasons - the ways in which the person may be beautiful, the arguments for and against - and then make a reasoned judgement? Even if you do not consciously think about the reasons, there must be some reasons why you think someone is beautiful or ugly.

You must have found that sometimes you disagree with your friends about who is more beautiful and who is less beautiful. Different people have different opinions about beauty. Different communities may have different ideas about who is beautiful. Our opinions about who is beautiful may also change over time.

Why do we form opinions about beauty?

Why do we care about the beauty of a woman? One obvious reason is that a woman's beauty is a factor in deciding who will be her mate. A woman tries to make herself appear to be beautiful so that she will be appealing to men - a desirable bride.

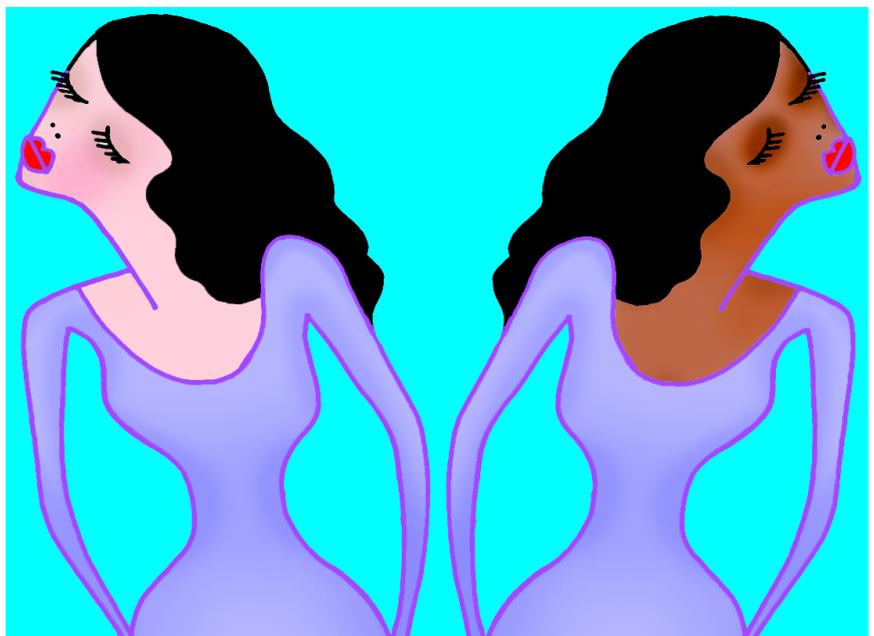
Besides marriage, there are other kinds of opportunities available to women who are considered to be 'good looking'. Perhaps they will be more popular at school. Could they even be more apt to get good marks, and to get good jobs?

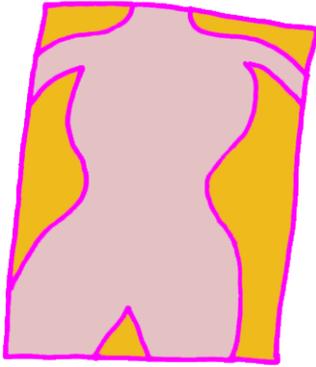
You might think that beautiful women are desirable just because they are nice to look at. It makes us happy to see beauty.

How do we form our opinions about beauty?

Who decides what is beautiful? Does each one of us have our own idea of what is beautiful, independently of our family, community, or society? No one actually lives separately, so of course we are all influenced by what others think is beautiful. For example, if we grow up in a society in which the richest, most powerful people tend to have lighter skin colour, it is not surprising that we will think of light skin colour as beautiful. In fact, this opinion will also be useful as a means of keeping the powerful light-skinned people in power. It is one aspect of racism.

However, those of us who do not have light skin and are not powerful may object. In today's world we realise that such ways of defining opportunities are oppressive and unfair. We do not think it is right to condemn people just because of the colour of their skin. A person's rights and opportunities should not depend on the colour of their skin.





People have an infinite variety of skin colours. Skin colour is a characteristic that we are born with. But it also depends on our interaction with the environment - we may get darker if we spend more time in the sun. People who have to work outside in the sun will thus be more apt to have slightly darker skin than if they worked inside. Many kinds of outdoor work are lower paid and of lower status compared to many kinds of indoor work. This is another reason why we may consider darker skin to be inferior.

Ideas about inferiority based on looks are reinforced by the things we see in films, television, and other media. If a girl grows up in a society surrounded by images of beautiful women with light skin, it is unlikely that she will think that dark skin is beautiful.

We may try to change our bodies and dress ourselves in ways that will make us beautiful. Sometimes we even go to such great extents to make ourselves beautiful, that it may cause us pain or discomfort. For example, it is not uncommon for women to buy 'beautiful', but uncomfortable shoes.

Our opinions about which shoes are beautiful are greatly influenced by what we see in films, TV, and advertisements. Companies make shoes in order to make money, and the styles depend on how they think they will be able to make the most money. Therefore, the shoe companies do not really care about how long the shoes will last or how comfortable they will be. Some shoes actually cause ailments and permanent damage to our bodies. This is because making a profit is of course the main concern of the shoe makers. They try to define "beauty" in a way that will increase their profit. Beauty becomes another commodity to be bought and sold.

Companies have perfected the art of defining fashion and feminine beauty to their advantage. Thus, we have beauty pageants, fashion shows, abusive and lewd advertisements displaying women's bodies, and pornography.



A rich man is likely to buy a car if it is pictured with a scantily dressed woman draped over it. The woman has been reduced to a commodity - an object used to sell a car. Today the use of women's bodies for commercial purposes is so commonplace that it seems normal and usually passes without protest or even recognition.

Let's examine the beauty pageant. What is the purpose of a beauty pageant? Is it like some form of sport - a game for our entertainment? Is its purpose to find the most beautiful woman in the world - so that everyone can then enjoy her beauty? Is it to give a few women a chance at attaining some measure of fame and wealth?

If it is a sport, it certainly shares one characteristic with other sports like cricket and tennis: commercialisation. In fact, pageants actually are advertisements - media events conceived and paid for by corporations so that they can sell their wares and make ever larger profits.

Just as the purpose of a fashion show is to sell clothing, a beauty pageant's purpose is to sell beauty. Not just lipstick, clothing, perfume, soap, shoes, hair colour - but the concept of beauty itself.

Actually, there is no absolute beauty. Our concepts of beauty are determined by our society, culture, and traditions, as well as by our personal experience. Different communities may have different definitions of beauty. If there is more global agreement today about what is and is not beautiful, it is only because the global environment is becoming more uniform, and regional cultures are disappearing. This is due to the effects of mass media such as TV. Whereas formerly people belonging to a certain tribe may have found a woman to be beautiful if she had wide hips and a flat nose, today the same people may prefer a woman who is wearing lipstick, a western dress, and suffers from anorexia. Why? Because it is this kind of woman that is seen on TV, irresistibly flashing signs of wealth and glamour.

By definition, the majority of women will never succeed at being beautiful.

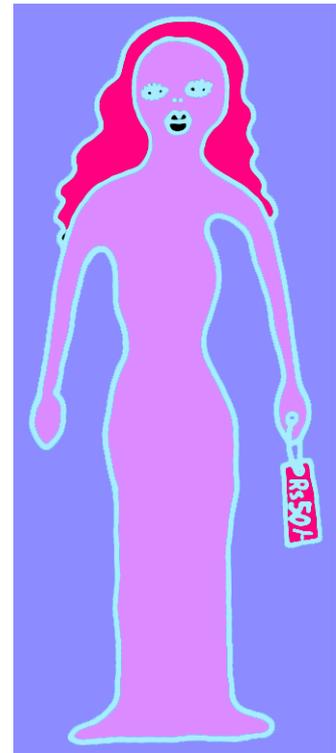
Beauty can only exist if ugliness also exists. If every woman was equally beautiful, there would be no beauty. But women are indoctrinated with that ideal and with the desire to attain the unattainable beauty, however impossible. Companies benefit, by selling the lipstick, fingernail polish, shampoo, perfume, frilly underwear, and clothing.

Far from promoting a greater awareness of physical well-being, the emphasis on a certain ideal of feminine beauty has caused a great amount of physical as well as mental suffering - especially among people who have enough money to keep consuming more than what they need. The practically inevitable failure to maintain the 'correct' body shape and weight prompts an unending series of 'diets', and exercises. However, these efforts usually fail because they are accompanied by tremendous temptations to consume ever greater amounts of unhealthy food and drink. In the USA, dieting and exercising have become huge industries. Nowhere on earth are people so preoccupied with the desire not to be fat - and yet it remains the country with the greatest number of fat, physically unfit people. Added to this are diseases ranging from allergies and asthma to cancer that

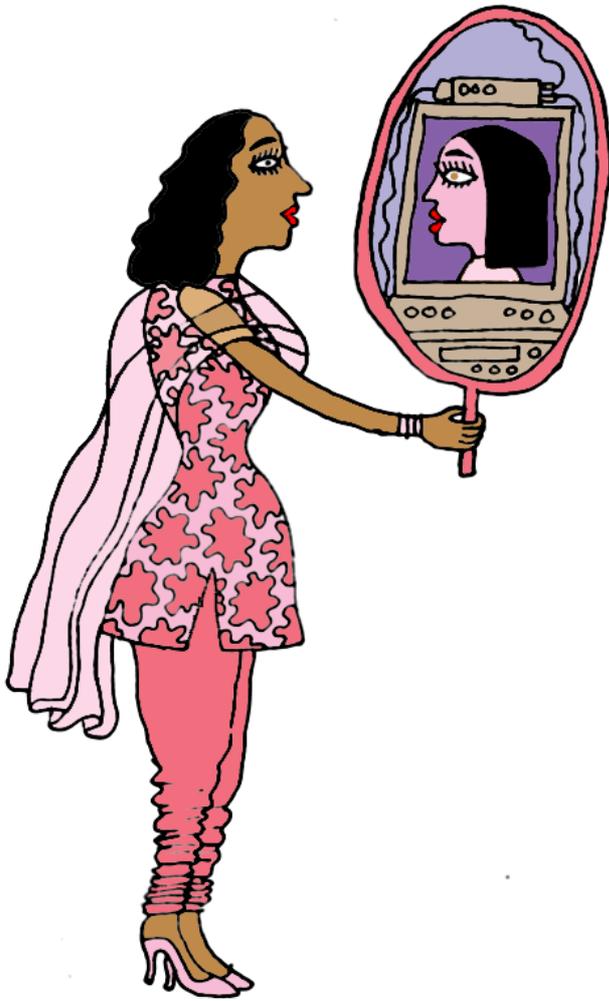


are caused by various kinds of make-up, skin and hair products, and practices like sunbathing to attain the correct colour of skin.

Perhaps of even greater importance, there is the mental anguish, alienation, and feeling of inadequacy, guilt and shame that results when a woman feels she does not live up to the standards of beauty. Almost every woman is made to feel physically inadequate in one aspect or another - if it's not a nose of the wrong shape, it's lips that are too fat or too thin. Maybe the hair is too curly or too straight, the legs are too hairy, the muscles too prominent, or the arms too thin. And of course, after a certain age every woman will automatically lose whatever beautiful looks she may have once had, since the image of feminine beauty is confined exclusively to young women.



Beauty pageants and fashion shows are advertisements to sell the idea and the ideal of beauty, fashion, and 'woman'.



However, this self perception of inadequacy may be of some use to society - it helps to maintain the status-quo. If a woman feels inadequate she will be less apt to rebel or demanding a better position in life. A woman who feels ugly and worthless will be more apt to continue washing the utensils in silence, feeling she does not deserve to earn as much or work as little or be as free as her husband, or as those beautiful, pale upper-class wives.

We are not saying that the idea of beauty should not exist in society. Of course people will always make judgements about a woman's beauty. But we should be aware why we are making the judgements. And we should protest against the monolithic definition of beauty for commercial purposes. We should protest against the exploitation of the female body for commercial benefits because it hurts the minds and bodies of so many women.